

A LUNCHEON AT NICK'S

By Kate Jordan

(Mrs. F. M. Vermilye)

THE snow fell straightly and sleepily, the big fire burned with an embracing rosiness, the clock ticked like an old gossip who lisps and whispers. There were worse places in New York than the Union Club on this white, Winter day.

Tom Duncan saw something in the heart of the fire which interested him. His clear-featured face, tanned like a Moor's and with eyes as dark, was sunk upon his breast. A pleasant memory had given his gaze an unusual softness. A daily paper in the grasp of his languid fingers trailed on the floor.

A man, in passing, bent over him.

"Not hunting tigers now, Tom? By that look on your face, I'd say you heard the angels, *à la Little Eva* and *Uncle Tom*."

"Sit down, Nick. Smoke one of mine."

"Now for an explanation of that seraphic expression," said Nick, settling himself in a chair, his feet hanging over one arm.

"As if I heard the angels, you said! Well, I did, Nick. I heard a woman singing." Tom lifted the paper. "What vistas in memory a newspaper paragraph can unclothe! I've just read that Madame Ardelli is in New York—her first visit to America."

"So, during your ten years' absence, you've done something more than swelter in African jungles? Where did you meet her?"

"Paris—eight years ago; young widow then, and just about to make her *début* on the stage. She was an Italian, named Bianca, with eyes like all the poems of Byron and Swin-

burne rolled together; a fascinating study—a sphinx in the body of a woman."

"Going to fall in love with her all over again?"

Tom shook his head, with decision.

"Revivals are never successes. She's eight years older, and so am I. But I've a hundred questions I'd like to ask her."

"A good fairy ought to bring the meeting about."

"Ah, yes! say a tête-à-tête luncheon, where I could study Bianca over a table, as she nibbled an olive, or dabbled with a grape."

"Ask her to lunch with you."

"Not without the proper setting. Fancy us at Sherry's or Delmonico's! It would be like looking at a gathered rose, framed in loud gilt instead of between the yellowed leaves of an old book of poems—Rossetti's, for preference."

"Atmosphere means a lot to you."

"Yes, Nick. I'm a hunter by instinct, and wouldn't have the leopard change his spots for anything; but I've never got over being a poet. Now, I know just what I'd like: Take a snowy day like this, New York shut in by the whiteness so that it seems in a trance, the cars banging along, but with the brazen gongs muffled. It is so quiet!" He half-closed his eyes as he sketched the picture in his mind. "Here we have a nest of rooms—an artist's home, let's say; the rooms are high up in a big building, the neighborhood old-fashioned, out of the way; from the great north windows one sees the snow-packed roofs, smoke, steam;

and, as twilight comes, electric lights winking in the whiteness, singly and in clusters. Ah, it's a fairyland, and New York seems a million miles away. The rooms are dim, luxurious; nothing but candle-light is allowed there; a piano yawns in a shadowed corner; there is an excellent servant, who seems to have neither eyes nor ears, as he comes and goes. I see myself there at luncheon; the table winks with glass and silver, champagne creams and bubbles, and opposite me is a woman with dark, beautiful eyes that are triolets and quatrains of love. How exquisitely she talks, and how tenderly I listen; or how tenderly I talk, and how exquisitely she listens!" Tom shook himself, with a sigh. "Ah, such a place would make the revival a poem!"

"Do you know, by Jove, your description fits my studio exactly?" cried Nick, in amaze.

Duncan grinned at him, defiantly. "I know it does."

"Well, have your luncheon at my place; I bestow it upon you."

"I meant you to."

"You've been hinting all this time?" Nick asked, in a flat voice.

"Shamelessly."

II

THE powers arranging the weather-menu were kind to Tom. Three days later, as his hansom took him to Nick Compton's studio, in the neighborhood of Washington Square, it was snowing again in the soft, spiritless fashion he loved. He was unadulteratedly content, shot with anticipative thrills, as the lift took him up, and he stepped from the damp, stone hall, a few flakes clinging to his shoulders, into an atmosphere of Eastern luxury. The vague tints from old rugs were there, the winking luster of brass and copper, riotous pinks and blues in Algerian studies, the flashing whiteness of minarets, and the scarlet of many turbans in Moslem scenes.

In a draped alcove, the round mahogany shone in splashes between the squares of embroidered linen; there

were twinkling candles under deep-red shades, and a low dish of Egyptian silver crowded with red roses. Through the close curtains, the snow could be seen, falling dreamily.

"Charming, Finch," Tom murmured to the immaculate servant, who seemed to attend to his duties while being, in a sense, non-existent.

He seated himself before the fire, and, as the poetry and invitation of the place captured his senses, his content left him. Madame Ardelli would be only a pleasurable mental problem. He was a fool to experiment, raking over old ashes, to ask the Past to lunch with him. Decidedly, he and she would be a dreary twain. Ah, that he were waiting for a woman whose touch would mean life, whose glance could, by magic, fling wide the door of his untenanted heart, and let the sun of her personality stream in!

It was twelve minutes past the hour when Finch came in with a letter. Madame Ardelli could not come; the snow, her throat, her concert, her manager——

"Oh, damn!"

Tom thrust his hands into his pockets, and pranced. The word is literal. He kicked a chair, because it was necessary to kick something.

"Lord!" he said, glaring at the Winged Victory; "how can I ever face Nick? What a laugh there is on me! Nick will keep quiet, though, if I ask him. But what about this Finch?"

A hope came to him. Finch was a new man, and had been with Nick only a week. Perhaps, by the time he came in contact with the servants of his friends, he might have forgotten this. And now—what to do? Tom walked the length of the studio, went into the next room, into Nick's bedroom and out again, tempestuously, for five minutes. He kicked whatever appeared in his path. Still beset by indecision, and hating the sight of the arranged table, he flung himself into a chair by a big desk in an inner room, his brow like thunder. He upset a heap of photographs, and began an inspection which was only a part of

his frantic mood. The horrible consciousness that the impeccable Finch was waiting in the kitchen, quite oppressed him.

The photographs were chiefly of models and burlesque actresses. Many of them had been taken by Nick for studies. None of them was more than a shadow to his angry eyes until he saw one, the largest of all. This he looked at attentively, just as he made up his mind to call Finch and lunch in sumptuous solitude.

The picture showed a girl of twenty, or a little more, as Cupid. She wore the usual costume and gauze wings, but the face was of such poetic and unusual beauty that it affected Tom like some of the dreamiest strains in "*Musica Prohibita*." Her hair, shot with light, made a glittering tangle across a brow like Clytie's; there was an Egyptian calm under the long, narrow eyelids; the curled mouth was poutingly sad, as if Cupid had just uttered some word of passionate regret for his broken bow; the chin, held up reliantly, showed the round, columned throat. Over the pretty, crossed feet, a name was scrawled in thick black, as if written with a match, "Merrily yours, Dolly Asquith." That a girl with such a face could sign herself, "Merrily yours," caused Tom to experience a little shudder; but, then, she was Dolly Asquith, the dancer. The photograph was still in his hand as he touched the bell. Finch hurried in.

"The lady I expected is detained, Finch," he said, with a poor counterfeit of a careless smile; "I shall lunch alone."

He looked at Dolly's face as he sat at the table, and, after a second's hesitation, propped the photograph against the roses.

"You're better than nothing," he said; "you'll bear me company. How do you come by those eyes, where the sadness and wisdom of centuries seem to dwell? I'll wager you're related to Pharaoh! How do you come by that sensitive mouth? What would it say if it could speak to me?"

He took a sip of sherry, finished the kingfish, and pushed his chair back a trifle from the table.

Finch knocked and entered, but with nothing in his hands. He shut the door, carefully.

"The lady has come, after all, sir."

"The deuce!"

"But she asked for Mr. Compton, and she has a portmanteau with her."

"What name did she——?"

"She didn't say, sir, and I didn't think it necessary to ask. I recognized her from the photograph, sir." And Finch glanced, with imperturbable dignity, at Dolly against the roses.

An electric comprehension shot through Tom. He smiled.

"Yes, of course—of course; quite right. I'll see her. Keep the fish hot."

He hurried out to the hall, which was furnished like a room. On a divan under a temple lamp, burning like a big, red eye, he saw the original of the photograph.

"Miss Asquith!" he exclaimed, gladly. "You arrived most opportunely, though Mr. Compton isn't in."

"Isn't he?" she asked, staring at him.

"No; but I've heard so much of you, though I've not yet seen you at The Folly."

"Haven't you?"

"I'm delighted to play host, however," said Tom, gaily; "I expected a friend to luncheon, but have been disappointed. I hope you won't mind this invitation at a moment's notice. Won't you come in?"

"Thank you," she murmured, "but I can't stay very long. I just wanted to see Nick a moment. I was on my way to a train."

"But you can stay and lunch with me. Oh, surely! Please don't say no. Finch, take Miss Asquith's bag, and see that she has everything she wishes."

Dolly was studying him with frank curiosity, her hands in the pockets of her tan rain-coat. She showed her small, intensely white teeth in the most delighted, childish smile he had ever seen.

He went back to the studio to wait for her. After the sense of disappointment that had taken possession of him, he became so jubilant that a few waltz steps were needed to do justice to his elation. He was whirling around, when he heard the clapping of hands at the doorway, and Miss Asquith came in.

"Come on!" she cried, with a ringing laugh; and, in a moment, they were skimming around the studio in a wild dance, while Finch sedately carried in the fish.

When they paused for want of breath, she flung herself on a heap of pillows with an artless *insouciance*, laughter bubbling from her lips. Tom looked down at her with the frankest delight. With her hat and veil removed, she outshone her photograph as the real landscape puts an etching to shame. She wore a perfectly cut, black serge gown, with boyish collar and cravat, and a bunch of violets was fastened at her belt. She was piquant and correct, save for the numerous rings she wore.

"Oh, I'm so glad I came!" she cried. "Isn't this place gorgeous? Luncheon, too! I'm in luck. I'd like to send the girl that stood you up a vote of thanks."

She winked roguishly at her photograph as she sat down at the table.

"Looks quite at home. Do you think it does me justice?" she asked, turning her face frankly to him and assuming a pose.

"It's but a faint shadow of you," said Tom, honestly.

"Oh, but the ankles! They're the limit!"

"A libel, I'm sure," he said, filling her champagne-glass.

"Well, rather," and she tossed her beautiful head; "but I forgot. You haven't seen my turn."

"Are you good?"

"Well," and she smiled, naively, "judging by the notes I receive, I'm the whole show at The Folly. There's no one else in it."

"Dance for me, later," begged Tom; "I consider my education neglected

until I, too, can properly rate the photographer."

"Maybe," she smiled; "after I've had a little more champagne."

"Do you like the fish?"

"It's dandy."

"We have mushrooms in the chafing-dish for an entrée. I hope you're as fond of them as I am."

"They're elegant; I never can get enough of them."

"The partridge," said Tom, with undisguised laughter, "really, I think you'll find the partridge very stylish!"

She stared at him with a winsome reproach and sadness, her fork halfway to her mouth.

"You're guying me," she murmured. "Oh, I know I make mistakes. No one tells me the difference."

"Dear child," said Tom, tenderly, taking her hand, "as you look at me, your eyes sheltered behind your lashes and swimming in light, you are a permanent excuse for misused adjectives, I assure you. You *look* as if you could feel; you *look* as if you had soul depths. This ought to be enough. Goethe and Heine found it enough."

"I never heard of that firm," said Dolly, regretfully.

"Some day, I'll tell you more about them," Tom promised, while he thought he had never seen a more enchanting smile than that which spread, like a little wave, from eyes to lips; "in fact, Dolly, I hope to have many talks with you and to know you well. Don't you think we might become great chums—great friends?"

"Maybe." She drew her fingers from his clasp, and began idly moving them on his hand as if she were playing the piano. "What's your first name?"

"Haven't I told you?" Tom cried, in mock horror. "Good heavens! we've known each other nearly half an hour, and I haven't told you that my name is Tom!"

"Oh, Tommy, Tommy Atkins," she hummed; then: "What's your business?" she asked, ingenuously.

"Well, if I have any profession," he said, lightly, "it's murder."

"Murder!" she gasped, pushing her chair back. "Oh, if I'd known that! My heavens! murder!"

"Don't be alarmed. I've never yet slain a charming actress, so you're quite safe, dear little girl. I've been killing lions and tigers in Africa for years. When I haven't been killing them, I've been killing time."

"Oh, you were fooling! My, I had a scare! And you were in Africa?" she said, as she tranquilly sipped some champagne. "What salary do you get for killing tigers?"

"None at all."

"So much apiece, I suppose," she hazarded, her eyes all blueness and wonder.

"Oh, you're delicious!" and Tom's laugh rang out; "you're perfectly bewitching! No, Dolly, I made no money at that profession; instead, I spent a lot."

"Are you rich?"

"I think you'd call me rich. That depends so on one's point of view. This partridge is just right. What do you call rich?"

"Well, I call Ned Van Piper rich. He gave every one of the chorus a sunburst for Christmas. Oh, they were grand! I adore sunbursts, don't you?"

"I'll send you one to-morrow."

"Really? Or is this a case of 'Oh, go on, you're only fooling'?" Her eyes were sparkling. "I don't think a girl can have too many sunbursts, you know."

"Neither do I. Have a cigarette?"

"Um—I'd love one with the salad. Won't you light up, too?"

He moved his chair around to her side, a cigarette in his fingers.

"You're the vestal with the light," he said, with laughing mockery; "so come to my aid." And he touched the cigarette to hers.

"What's a vestal?"

"No matter." He continued to gaze into her eyes. "May I?" he asked.

"What?"

"Kiss you—just there," and he touched the point of her chin.

She flicked his fingers away.

"Don't get gay, Thomas!" she said, with a shrug, and went over to the fire; "let's have the coffee here."

She sank into a deep chair, and half turned from the blaze, watching the falling snow without. Tom sat beside her, leaning toward her, confidentially.

"Makes me sleepy—the snow," she said, her fresh lips yawning like a child's, her eyes closing; "it's just like the sea—that makes me sleepy, too."

Something about her in that moment appealed overpoweringly to Tom. The edge of the adventure became blunted when he regarded her as a human being, a girl of twenty, and not as Dolly Asquith, the dancer. She was here alone with him, at the mercy of his mood. Their very familiarity—and they had been strangers but an hour ago—had something ugly in it, something with a hint of tragedy.

"Ah! lazy, lily hand, more bless'd
If ne'er in rings it had been dress'd,
Nor ever by a glove conceal'd!"

These, and other lines by Rossetti, would creep into his mind. Why should "Jenny" haunt him now? He had not read the poem in a twelve-month. He forcibly pushed the thoughtful mood from him. What a fool he was! Dolly would mock him if she knew he felt sorry for her. Sorry, when she had just finished a lunch where "wine was opened!" When she had a new possibility on her string named Thomas Duncan; while her hands blazed with a wealth of rings, and she was promised a sunburst on the morrow! Dolly would call herself in great luck.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked, opening her eyes, sleepily. "You look as sober as a judge."

"I've been thinking of you—strange thoughts," he said; and, lifting her hand, now unreluctant, he kissed it very tenderly. "Child, you have a power in you, a play of expression, a spirit behind your beauty that fascinates me. I want to know you better—I must. Will you dine with me to-night?"

"I'd like to," she whispered, her lashes falling; "but I can't."

"You want to know me, don't you?"

"Yes," she said, her voice quivering; "I like you. Oh, I liked you from the first moment—better than I ought to."

"Then dine with me," said Tom, his heart exultant; "why not?"

"I can't—I—I daren't."

"Well, if I call for you at the theatre, will you come to supper with me? Why do you hesitate?"

"Do you really, really care for me?" she said, her shrinking gaze very earnest, "or is it just because I'm Dolly Asquith, the dancer?"

"I picked your photograph from scores of others," he whispered, "and I am only conscious now of one wish—to know you better. I've never seen a face with such witchery as yours. It fascinates me. Were you a dancer or a queen, it would be the same. You are marvelously lovely."

He stroked her hand, tenderly. "I wish you were attracted a little bit to me," he pleaded.

"I am," said Dolly, with sudden intensity, and something tragic in her eyes; "oh, I am! But there's something else, and I wish I hadn't met you to-day—yes, I do."

To his consternation, she covered her face with her hands, and her shoulders shook with sobs.

"Dolly, what is it? What makes you cry?"

"There's something I must tell you about," she whimpered, so softly that he had to bend very close to hear. "You can help me make up my own mind. I came to-day to tell Nick—we've been such good pals, Nick and I—that I was leaving The Folly; going—going—to get married."

"Married?" he asked, a chill in the tone.

"Yes. You know Quinn's big livery stables? Well, Andy Quinn. We grew up together. I promised to marry him, and now—now," she whimpered, "I'm not so sure that I want to."

She started up, turned away, and faced him with defiant eyes.

"It would mean leaving the stage for good—giving up knowing nice boys like you and Nick, having suppers and larks, and all that sort of thing that I love. I'd have to settle down and be so quiet. Oh, how can I give it all up—the stage, the excitement, the lights, the fun of having a jolly life! It takes hold of a girl, you know," she said, desperately. "But I'd made up my mind to take the plunge with Andy, and now, to-day, this lunch with you, this knowing you, has made me wonder if it's worth while."

She tossed back her head, and began pacing up and down. Tom watched her.

"Here," she said, turning suddenly, her cheeks blazing, her eyes like bits of a blue, noon-day sky; "I'll leave it to you. Shall I quit this sort of thing, never see you after to-day, or—or—not marry Andy? I'll do just what you say." And she brought her little clenched hand down upon the table.

Tom looked uncomfortable. His spirits fell. "Why do you have me decide?" he asked.

"Because," she said, with startling emphasis, "I like you. Shall I say good-bye to you, or not? Wouldn't I be a fool to marry Andy? Wouldn't I be a stupid fool?" she asked, with insinuating softness.

"Does this Andy love you?"

"Oh, yes; he loves me, all right; better than his life, I guess," she said, folding her arms and staring at the fire.

"And what about yourself? Do you love Andy?"

She hesitated, then looked at him, miserably.

"Sometimes, I think I do. I know I could—maybe—if I could only make up my mind to quit this life, the stage and all the rest. What would you do, Tom?" she said, her voice becoming caressing. "If I leave here at once, I go straight to Andy. He's waiting for me at the train. What would you do?"

Finch knocked at the door.

"Mr. Compton is on the telephone, sir, and wants to speak to you for just a minute."

Tom moved to follow him, but Dolly laid her hand upon his arm.

"Tell me—before you go."

"When I come back."

"No," she said, with decision; "I don't want to talk about it again. What shall I do?"

She was very beautiful and inviting, and the look in her eyes made his pulses stir; but the memory of her as she had looked, when half-asleep and he had thought of "Jenny," rushed back to him, and, in that instant, he said farewell to her.

"Take the honest man who loves you, Dolly; take the safety, the home," he said, with a new seriousness.

"And you don't mind never seeing me again?" she faltered.

"I mind very much; but, as one who desires your ultimate happiness, I tell you to leave the stage and marry Andy."

She laid her arm on the mantel, and rested her cheek upon it, as he hurried from the room.

"Hello!" Tom called at the telephone. "This is Tom, Nick."

"Oh, I say, Tom," he heard, "an awkward thing has happened. I was late getting to the club, and found a letter there from my sister Sally. She was passing through town, and wanted to know if I wouldn't have her at luncheon, and perhaps go up with her to Westchester to-night, and fetch you along. You know, she's so anxious to meet you! she's heard so much of your adventures with African lions——"

"Yes," murmured Tom; "and then——?"

"Well, by Jove! she's going to the studio, on the way from the Long Island train, to look me up. Deuced awkward, isn't it? I'm awfully sorry; but tell Finch to explain to her that I'm waiting now at Delmonico's. How's Bianca? What a grunt! Can't understand you. Well, good-bye. You can easily get rid of Sally."

Tom hung up the receiver, and stood stroking his lip, thoughtfully.

"I don't understand—it can't be—and yet——"

He turned swiftly on the trail of an inspiration, and entered the room where Dolly's portmanteau stood. Two gold letters on its brown sides faced him—S. C. He walked into the studio, his face pale under the tan, his eyes sparkling.

His guest was still before the fire, and they looked at each other. She was slowly drawing off the many rings, her cheeks flushed, her eyes very humble.

"I'm taking off my theatrical make-up," she said, very softly. "These belonged to the part."

Tom went to the table, and took up the photograph.

"Will you explain this? You didn't sit for it?" he asked, in a businesslike voice.

"No; it's Asquith from the chin down. Nick can play tricks with photography that seem like black art. He put my head on that to amuse me. I'd no idea he'd one of them here."

"How interesting!" said Tom, handing it to her; "I must compliment you on your talent, Miss Compton. The stage has lost a wonder."

Sally stared at him, looking very miserable.

"Please forgive me, Mr. Duncan. I went into this thing through sheer fun; and, now, I see that it might have turned out a very shabby trick."

Tom was still angry, though Sally was almost irresistible in her penitence.

"Yes," he said, with a dry laugh; "I might have made a thundering fool of myself. But, if you had an hour's amusement, surely I ought not to complain."

"But you came out of it with flying colors," she said, with one of her vivid smiles, "thanks to your innate goodness and really beautiful character."

Tom took up his hat and coat, but she stepped before him, and held out her hand.

"I don't blame you for being annoyed; but listen to me," she pleaded, like a repentant child. "I'd just come to town from a visit to the Nor-

mans, in Babylon. Life there was as slow as a snail. I came to Nick to make him take me to luncheon, and to try to capture you and him for over-night at The Barracks. His man didn't know me, you had this luncheon on your hands, you christened me Dolly Asquith as you greeted me. I fairly tumbled into the part, and slipped on the rings when I took off my hat. Now, wasn't it a temptation, when I knew I could act, and was eaten through with boredom, eh?"

"I suppose it was," said Tom, softening.

"And you'll come to The Barracks to-night with Nick?"

"I want to go—if you'd like to have me."

"You earned your invitation a few moments ago," she confided, "when you gave that silly Dolly such good advice."

Although Tom laughed, a little chill passed over him. "Let me be perfectly honest, though. Perhaps, I'm not quite as angelic as you fancy. Do you know, I came very near saying to Dolly: 'Send Andy Quinn to Halifax, and come to supper with me.' By Jove! suppose I had?"

"But you didn't!" she cried, flinging back her head, gladly; and she added, softly: "Oh, I am glad you didn't!"

